

Comments on an article by J. Whitehouse

Jim Starling

Planning Co-ordinator, National Parks and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 1967, Hurstville, NSW 2220

The article by John Whitehouse "Conserving What? — The basis for nature conservation areas in New South Wales 1967-1989" sets out to achieve two things:

- to present an historical perspective of the development of the nature conservation system since 1967; and
- to propose a model "based upon a nature conservation agency explicitly and logically formulating a nature conservation programme from its initial objectives or bases through a sampling strategy to reserve design".

The first of these aims attracts some comment from me; I suspect the second will draw more responses from a wide range of correspondents.

My response to these themes is based on a long association with the National Parks and Wildlife Service including the period up to 1976 when I was responsible for new area investigations. Before 1967, I was a member of the staff of the Fauna Protector Panel for about a year.

The historical perspective

With respect to the first intention I would offer the following two comments:

- no recognition has been given to the most important features of the nature conservation programme inherited from the Fauna Protection Panel by the then new National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1967; and
- the context of "science" in nature conservation up to about the mid 1970s is glossed over. The important events are recorded but some aspects of their significance remain without adequate appreciation.

The Fauna Protection Panel was responsible for at least three major philosophical initiatives during the 1960s which bear strongly on the historical development of nature conservation in New South Wales and Australia. These were:

- the recognition that the management of native animal populations, not the protection of individual animals, was the key to the survival of native animals in the wild;
- the recognition that a system of nature reserves where habitat management was paramount was the single most important aspect of native animal conservation programmes; and

- the recognition that effective public education and awareness of the importance of native animals and their habitats was essential to long-term conservation.

These initiatives were converted into very impressive achievements for a small organization working the bureaucratic and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s. This foundation was essential in setting the scene for the growth and development of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

In this context the paper also fails to adequately express the condition of science in nature conservation in 1967. Compared to 1990 there was very little basic understanding of the ecology or dynamics of the Australian natural landscape. Source material was generally broad brush descriptions based on whole of state or large regions. The nature conservation programme, accordingly, was also broad brush and, for the record, areas were ascribed general priorities on the basis of:

- the coast
- the semi-arid interior (Western Division)
- western slopes and plains (based on Anderson's vegetation regions)
- wetlands

Areas were also identified in the "eastern fall" country (i.e., the Great Escarpment) and the sandstone belt around Sydney-Newcastle-Wollongong.

Very early in the land investigation process decisions were being made on the basis of representativeness and "uniqueness" or unusualness. Many of the areas proposed for reservation or declaration had been inherited from the Fauna Protection Panel.

Some areas were given priority for quite opportunistic reasons; for example expiring western lands leases focussed attention on the semi-arid regions of New South Wales during the period up to 1975. Notwithstanding, when the gaps in the nature conservation system were virtually the whole state, sampling strategies or investigation programmes are driven by different (broad) considerations than is the case where the sampling programme focusses on specific gaps in a more complete system.

This background is not adequately recognized in John Whitehouse's paper. For a more complete perspective of the history of nature conservation a statement explaining that the broad brush approach of the early years of

the Service to new area investigation necessarily reflected the amount and detail of regional biogeographic surveys. Indeed the period up to 1975 saw rapid development of regional and detailed surveys as well as attempts at systemitizing the conservation status of plant and animal communities and species native to Australia.

John Whitehouse's paper acknowledges most of the events in the growth of knowledge of conservation needs in New South Wales but fails to acknowledge the contributions of the Fauna Protection Panel and staff of the National Parks and Wildlife Service at the time.

The article reflects the point of view of the writer looking back from 1989 to the 60s and 70s but missing the ambience of those earlier times.

The model

My comments on John Whitehouse's "model" for nature conservation are offered in the context that I believe that this "initiative" reflects a limited view of past nature conservation programmes. I am sure that others more recently involved in land investigation will be critical of the underlying science of the model, and my comments will be much more limited.

The model proposed, as I understand it, intends to do two things:

- to redirect programming from an "area based" consideration to one of being "reserve based"; and thus
- to provide a mechanism for "explicitly and logically formulating a nature conservation programme" which will maximize land acquired for money (and other resources?) spent.

Two sets of distinctions are made in the model which are curious in so far as they are used to define the model and are seen as mutually exclusive:

- a difference is made between a "land based" nature conservation programme and a "resourced based" nature conservation programme; and
- a distinction is made between sampling based on genetic diversity and one on species diversity as the basis of such a resource based nature conservation programme.

There is an implication that in the past investigation in the article was "land based" (whatever that really means) and not "resource based". Surely the establishment and management of a nature conservation system is land based (since land is reserved or declared), but land is selected for such reservation/declaration on the basis of its utility or ability to satisfy needs — in this case its value for nature conservation purposes.

I suspect that other responses will argue that considerations of both genetic diversity and species diversity are important in establishing the relative merits of including an area in the nature conservation system. Other considerations will also be taken into account including scenery, cuddly animals etc. depending on the pragmatics of the situation at the time (i.e., politics, funding, opportunism).

This may be "irrational" in a scientific sense, but while nature conservation is as much a political process as anything else, debate about the nuances of species diversity versus genetic diversity will not be very relevant. There is nothing in the article that proposes alternative political and bureaucratic structures more suited to a perfect, rational world based on ensuring that Gaia not only continues to maintain genetic and species diversity but also heals herself for the benefit of us all.

Scientific knowledge: The basis for establishing reserves

J. S. Benson

National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales, P.O. Box 1967, Hurstville 2220

This contains some of my personal views on reserve selection and wildlife conservation based on 11 years working in this field with the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales.

The origin of public nature conservation reserves

The driving forces behind early reservation of lands for nature conservation were heavily tinged with romanticism. In the United States, the modern concept of nature conservation began with Thoreau; was given impetus by the accounts of natural marvels such as

Yosemite Valley by surveyors such as Clarence King in 1864 and in the writings of John Muir; then depicted by artists such as Albert Bierstadt and photographers such as William Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins. The idea of a National Park came from Nathaniel Langford while exploring the Yellowstone River. Americans were so aroused by these writings, art and photography that Congress established the world's first National Park at Yellowstone in 1872.

If we analyze the growth in the public awareness towards nature conservation in Australia we see similar